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SENSITIVE

FROM AMBASSADOR BARCLAY TO U/S BEARDSWORTH
DHS FOR KEVIN KELLY

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR ACTING U/S BEARDSWORTH VISIT TO EL
SALVADOR SEPTEMBER 1-3

1. (SBU) Acting Under Secretary Beardsworth, I look forward to your delegation's visit to El Salvador from September 1 to 3 to meet with Salvadoran officials and attend the inaugural graduation of the ILEA. The following background information may be useful for your preparations.

El Salvador-U.S. Relations

2. (SBU) El Salvador is one of our strongest allies in the Western Hemisphere, and remains the only Western Hemisphere nation besides the U.S. with troops serving with coalition forces in Iraq. The U.S. operates a Cooperative Security Location (CSL) that is colocated with a Salvadoran Air Force base at El Salvador's principal airport at Comalapa. The FBI will soon open an office at the Embassy for the purpose of exchanging intelligence with the GOES on street gang organizations. Embassy officers have unfettered access to the highest echelons of GOES officials.

Domestic Political Overview

3. (SBU) President Elias Antonio "Tony" Saca of the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) party assumed office June 1, 2004 after winning a hotly-contested presidential race. President Saca's ARENA party holds only 29 of 84 seats in the Legislative Assembly, but, through alliances with smaller parties, regularly passes legislation requiring a simple majority. ARENA's major political opposition is the leftist Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), which has been weakened recently by internal struggles and defections. Human rights problems are minimal. The Embassy continues to encourage the GOES to fully enforce and enhance labor protections. In particular, there are valid complaints regarding the difficulty of forming labor unions, and allegations of "blacklisting" of labor organizers. Attention is already focusing on municipal and Legislative Assembly elections scheduled for March of next year.

Domestic Economic Overview

4. (SBU) El Salvador's stable economy, the result of a broad reform agenda implemented by three successive ARENA governments, has earned El Salvador an investment-grade debt rating from Moody's, and provided a measure of economic predictability. Nonetheless, the economy has been growing at a disappointing rate of about two percent per year since 1999, despite its excellent macroeconomic fundamentals. President Saca's highest priorities are reinvigorating El Salvador's economy, creating jobs, and improving the nation's infrastructure. Roughly 40 percent of the population still lives in poverty. El Salvador ratified CAFTA in December 2004, the first country to do so; U.S. passage of CAFTA has raised hopes that increased trade can help jump-start the nation's sluggish economic growth.

El Salvador's Foreign Policy

5. (SBU) El Salvador's postwar ARENA governments have been reliable in their support for U.S. positions in international fora such as the UN, including on issues such as UN reform, human rights abuses in Cuba, and the Middle East peace process. Beginning more recently during the Flores administration, El Salvador has on occasion pursued a somewhat more independent course, but has still proven dependable on key matters of bilateral importance. El Salvador has recently broadened its foreign relations to include moderate Arab states such as Morocco and Qatar, and is actively seeking a seat on the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and possibly one of the nonpermanent seats on the UNSC.

Terrorism and International Crime

16. (SBU) El Salvador has been a consistently strong supporter of the United States in the fight against terrorism and international organized crime. El Salvador's geographic position makes it vulnerable to trafficking in drugs, people, and guns to or from the United States. Drug trafficking has received significant GOES attention and cooperation; El Salvador hosts the Cooperative Security Location (CSL) at Comalapa Airport. This is one of three CSL's in the region, and since 2001 has contributed to the seizure or disruption of about 210 metric tons of cocaine. Trafficking in persons, smuggling of aliens, and gunrunning remain problems due to the porous borders in Central America. The government passed new anti-trafficking legislation last year and is conducting raids against those suspected of exploiting children. The Border Police unit and Immigration service are working closely with the Department of Homeland Security and the Embassy to improve coordination with the U.S. and their ability to limit the illegal movement of people through El Salvador. Violent street gangs are a serious problem. Law enforcement efforts against the gangs have been hampered by the government's current inability to protect witnesses.

Civilian-Military Relations

17. (U) The Armed Forces of El Salvador (ESAF) are capable, professional, and subordinate to civilian authority. Currently, the ESAF has approximately 10,000 service members and 2,500 administrative personnel. The military consistently receives high approval ratings in public opinion polls, reflecting its dramatic transformation since the 1980-1992 war. The fifth contingent of a 380-person "Cuscatlan Battalion" task force that rotates every six months departed for Iraq in August 2005; nearly 2,000 Salvadoran soldiers have now served with coalition forces in Iraq. The Battalion has suffered two fatal casualties in Iraq, one combat death in Najaf on April 4, 2004 and one non-combat-related traffic death in Hilla on June 27 of this year. The ESAF has performed admirably in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in support of the Iraqi people. They have distributed supplies and provided key services, ranging from food distribution and medical support, to the donation of vehicles to the local police and hospital, to the distribution of household items and toys for children.

Migration Issues

18. (U) About 2.5 million Salvadorans live in the United States, most illegally. Since the 2001 earthquakes, between 250,000-280,000 Salvadorans have benefited from Temporary Protected Status (TPS), and have been able to live and work legally in the United States. The U.S. announcement in January 2005 of a further 18-month extension of TPS was of paramount importance to the Saca Administration; remittances from Salvadorans living abroad make up approximately 16 percent of the GDP, and are an important source of income for many Salvadoran families. Public opinion polls also show that 7 out of 10 Salvadorans would immigrate to the United States if given the chance. The GOES is focused on obtaining permanent status for TPS recipients, claiming it cannot absorb that number of returnees. The GOES has publicly complained about an alleged lack of intelligence sharing between U.S. law enforcement agencies and the GOES relative to criminal deportees.

Barclay